

Release of proliferator of nukes a risk, says U.S.

Pakistani court frees rogue scientist

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A Pakistani court's decision Friday to free nuclear proliferator Abdul Qadeer Khan from house arrest has created a new source of tension with the Obama administration on the eve of a visit by special envoy Richard Holbrooke.

Asked about Mr. Khan, whose black market sold nuclear-weapons technology to countries including Libya, Iran and North Korea for nearly two decades, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said, "I am very much concerned."

State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid called the Pakistani decision "unfortunate," saying Mr. Khan, despite being under house arrest for five years, is still a "serious proliferation risk."

"The proliferation support that Khan and his associates provided to Iran and North Korea has had a harmful impact on... international security and will for years to come," Mr Duguid told reporters.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said the Obama Administration wants "assurances that Dr. Khan is not engaged or involved in any of the activity that resulted in his house arrest."

Freed from his home, Mr. Khan, 72, lashed out at Pakistan's former President Pervez Musharraf, who put the restrictions on him under pressure from U.S. and other Western leaders.

"I don't care about the rest of the world," he told ABC News. "I care about my country. Obama cares about America - not about Pakistan, or India, Afghanistan, or anyone else, any other country."

Despite his black-market activities, Mr. Khan is considered a hero in Pakistan for obtaining the technology that allowed the country to build and test a nuclear weapon in 1998 - matching arch-rival India.

Chief Justice of the Islamabad High Court Sardar Muhammad Aslam announced the decision on a writ petition filed by Mr. Khan. The court order said Mr. Khan is "a free citizen" and "Dr. Khan's plea is disposed of in accordance with" an annex whose contents were not made public.

The Pakistani Foreign Office said in a statement that the government will provide security to Mr. Khan, suggesting that some restrictions may remain on his movement. "The so-called A.Q. Khan affair is a closed chapter," according to the statement.

However, the topic could come up when Mr. Holbrooke, the Obama administration's new envoy for South Asia, arrives in Islamabad next week. Mr. Holbrooke is assigned to help Pakistan and India deal with al Qaeda and homegrown Islamic militants.

Syed Ali Zafar, Mr. Khan's lawyer, earlier argued that his client was not involved in any criminal activity, despite Mr. Khan's admission in 2004 that he sold nuclear materials to Iran, Libya and North Korea.

Speaking to reporters at his residence after the verdict, Mr. Khan said the court decision is a matter between him and the government and has no connection with the United States.

"I am satisfied with the decision. Declaring me a free citizen is a matter between me and the government," he said. "I do not want to delve into the past. I want development of my country. I pray to God to save my country."

He said he will not get involved in politics. "I will focus on education, and setting up a welfare organization will be my top priority."

Mr. Khan thanked President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani for permitting his release and said he did not blame Gen. Musharraf, who was forced to step down last year. "God has already punished General Musharraf," Mr. Khan said. "He can not freely move and come on the roads today."

Nuclear specialists in Washington said Mr. Khan still poses a proliferation risk despite his age and time under house arrest.

"He probably still has access to sensitive nuclear information and his associates do," said David Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security.

Last year, Mr. Khan, while under house arrest, began communicating with journalists through his wife's e-mail account. U.S. officials have not been allowed to interview or debrief the scientist.

Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, a Washington think tank, called the release "more than disappointing; it's disturbing."

Mr. Sokolski, who serves on a congressionally mandated commission on weapons of mass destruction, added that the release shows the weakness of Pakistan's political leadership.

"The government ought to have the means of getting Mr. Khan to cooperate," Mr. Sokolski said. "It perhaps does not even want to, perhaps it is not strong enough to make that happen."

A U.S. counterproliferation official, speaking on the condition that he not be named, said the U.S. was "baffled" by the decision to free Mr. Khan.

Rep. Howard L. Berman, California Democrat and chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, warned that the release could lead to a reduction in U.S. aid for Pakistan.

"It is unclear whether the illicit smuggling network he created was fully dismantled even after he was placed under nominal house arrest," Mr. Berman said. "I'm deeply concerned that, by releasing him, the Pakistani government may in effect be giving him license to resume, perhaps directly, his past actions to aid, abet and profit from the spread of nuclear weapons."

Mr. Berman said U.S. officials "have been prevented from interviewing Khan to try to determine the extent of the damage he has done to world stability."

"Congress will take this into account as we review and create legislation on U.S.-Pakistan relations and the circumstances under which U.S. assistance is provided to Islamabad," he said.

The Foreign Ministry statement said that "as a responsible nuclear weapon state, Pakistan has taken all necessary measures to promote the goals of nonproliferation. Pakistan has also extended its fullest cooperation to the international community."